DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 370 642 JC 940 344

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TITLE The President's Task Force on Retention: Addressing Student Success.
PUB DATE 22 Jun 94
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Summer Institute on Institutional Effectiveness and Student Success (6th, Atlantic City, NJ, June 19-22, 1994).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Planning; Community Colleges; *Dropout Rate; *Planning Commissions; *School Holding Power; School Surveys; Student Attitudes; *Student Attrition; Teacher Attitudes; Two Year Colleges; *Withdrawal (Education)
IDENTIFIERS *Hudson County Community College NJ

ABSTRACT

Over the past decade, retention studies at Hudson County Community College (HCCC), in New Jersey, have consistently placed the college at or near the bottom of a group of 19 New Jersey community colleges in terms of retention. In an effort to determine why students were leaving and develop responses to student attrition, a presidential task force was established on student retention consisting of 22 people from every area of the college and co-chaired by a faculty member and a student affairs worker. To gather information, the task force conducted three retention surveys. First, retention-related materials were solicited from 82 top associate degree-producing community colleges nationally, with plans, policies, descriptions, handbooks, and other materials being received from 30 colleges. Then, a survey requesting "1-3 suggestions" for improving retention was sent to all 220 full-time faculty and staff. Responses were received from 44 people and included 164 ideas related to improvements in academic support (24%), college services (18%), and employee attitudes and staff development (13%). Finally, a questionnaire soliciting suggestions for improvement and reasons for leaving was distributed to students in 24 English courses, resulting in responses from 338 students or 10% of the student body. One-third of the student suggestions were related to facilities and parking, while courses, services, instruction, academic support, and finances also received suggestions. (KP)

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THE PRESIDENT'S TASK FORCE ON RETENTION: ADDRESSING STUDENT SUCCESS

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Presented at the
Summer Institute on Institutional Effectiveness and Student Success
Sponsored by the Community College Consortium,
Atlantic City, New Jersey, June 22, 1994

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Introduction

Before we consider the role and task of a presidential task force on retention, we would like to share several thoughts which we feel relate to this important process:

- If you can see the light at the end of the tunnel, you're probably looking in the wrong direction
- Perception is Reality
- When forced to accept it, we all dislike change

Each of these "famous/infamous" quotes offers insights which help shed light on the work of a retention task force: that is, (1) if you do not believe there is an attrition problem you are probably not paying attention, (2) students' perceptions do matter, and (3) change is difficult for college personnel.

Overview of the College

Hudson County Community College is a public two-year community college licensed by the New Jersey Board of Higher Education (1974) and accredited by the Commission of Higher Education of the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools (1981; 1986). The college began by using a contract-based model which means that services and instruction were delivered through contract by other nearby colleges with certificates and degrees awarded through the HCCC.

The college's mission has, until recently, been a limited one focusing on offering career-oriented problems. Over the years the college has evolved in its own right. It is, however, not without problems, some of which are inevitable given the college's distinct development. Problems include:

- High ratio of adjunct to full-time instructors
- Lack of resources
- High attrition
- No transfer articulation agreements
- High percentage of students requiring remediation
- Lack of facilities/no central campus

What did we know about retention at the College?

Over the years since HCCC was established, numerous retention studies have been carried out. These studies showed that 42 percent of the 1981 entering freshman studying full-time returned one year later; for the comparable 1982 cohort the return rate was 47 percent; for the 1983 cohort, 49 percent; for the 1984 cohort, 47 percent; for the 1985 cohort, 51 percent; for the 1987 cohort, 42 percent; for the 1988 cohort 42 percent; for the 1989 cohort 43 percent; and for the 1990 cohort 41 percent. The data showed that the one-year retention rate for students attending full-time had risen over the years but had declined to around 42 percent.

But what did this mean? How could we know if it was good or bad? The most significant information we had in this regard was data comparing the one-year retention rates among the nineteen community colleges in the state of New Jersey for the students who entered in 1987 and 1988. From that data we learned that for both years we ranked at or near the bottom of the range: for the 1987 cohort, the one-year retention rates of the colleges ranged from a low of 40 percent to a high of 66 percent -- HCCC's rate was 42

percent; and for the 1988 cohort, the rates ranges from a low of 42 percent to a high of 71 percent -- HCCC's rate was 42 percent.

Further, we found that we fared no better when the rates at which students were graduating was considered. The range of three-year graduation rates for the 1987 cohort of entering students was 2.9 percent for a low and 25.3 percent for a high at the community colleges throughout New Jersey -- HCCC's rate was 3.1 percent. The range of three-year graduation rates for the 1988 cohort of entering students was 4.1 percent to 28.5 percent -- HCCC's rate was 7.2 percent. We had made progress, but so had most colleges.

We knew that the low three-year graduation rates could be explained in part by the low academic preparation. And the data supported this: when academic proficiency was controlled for, the three-year graduation rates for 1987 entering students "proficient in basic skills" ranged from 0.0 percent to 34.8 percent -- HCCC's rate was 27.3 percent. But this group account for only a small proportion of our entering student body.

Other than the students "proficient in basic skills," the only categories in which the college evidenced "average" rates were in the one-year retention rate of 1988 entering EOF students, and the number of students transferring after two years.

In short, the comparative data available to us showed that the college had the lowest or near lowest retention and graduation rates of any of the community colleges in New Jersey. From our retention analysis we were able to identify some of the groups of students experiencing problems. For example, we knew that our ESL students tended to drop out after the fourth term; this was most likely at the point when they should have made the transition to degree level courses. We knew that we tended to lose Hispanic students at a

higher rate than other students, and this was particularly unfortunate since they made up 47 percent of our student body. We knew that we tended to lose *full-time* Hispanic students and *part-time* African American students at a higher rate than other students. We also knew that we tended to lose students at the end of any given academic year rather than between terms. And, finally, we knew that we were losing students with good grades as well as those in academic difficulty.

While this information did not necessarily explain to us why students were leaving, it did make us harshly aware that we had a problem concerning student attrition that we had to face squarely and come to terms with. We had to learn *why* our students were leaving, we had to figure out *what* we could do about it, and we had to mobilize the campus in the effort -- in short we needed a presidential task force on retention.

The establishment of the President's Task Force on Retention

The president, in consultation with the deans, identified two persons to co-chair a task force on retention; one of these persons was from the faculty and the other was from student affairs. Twenty-two individuals from every area of the college were then identified to serve on the task force.

The charge from the president was to be creative, realistic, and *fearless*. The task force was to consider itself free to "beg, borrow, and borrow" -- there was no need to re-invent the wheel. Ideas were available from other colleges.

The work of the task force this past year has led the members through a process of learning about retention -- both from within and without Hudson County Community

College. The meetings have been used to

- Identify the purpose of the task force and a philosophy regarding retention
- Share opinions about retention and attrition and possible causes of each
- Clarify definitions of "Student" and "Success" as well as of retention
- Learn what students are leaving the college and for what reason
- Learn what other colleges are doing about attrition problems

Information-Gathering: Three retention surveys

1. What could we learn from other community colleges?

The first survey effort carried out for the task force was a survey of other community colleges. Retention-related materials were sought from 82 community colleges nationally, 80 of which appeared on the list of 100 top associate degree producers plus two which were recommended by Dr. John Roueche, an expert in the field of retention programs. Responses were received from 30 (37 percent) of the colleges: 27 sent materials and three telephoned their response. The responding colleges represented 17 states; two colleges in New Jersey responded.

The materials ranged from retention plans, bibliographies, policies, general, orientation, and targeted programs, description of tracking and attendance monitoring systems, student handbooks, retention committee newsletters, announcements, suggestions for instructors, and retention studies.

With each reading, members of the task force whetted their appetite for action at HCCC. The possibilities for improvements at the college were almost overwhelming; these

materials generated so many ideas.

2. What could we learn from our own colleagues at the college?

A request for "1 - 3 suggestions concerning ways in which HCCC [could] increase its retention rate of students" was sent to all 220 full-time faculty and staff members at the college. Forty-four (20 percent) persons responded with 164 suggestions.

The suggestions can be broken down essentially as follows: 24 percent concerned ways to improve academic support (e.g. mentors, counseling); 18 percent concerned improvements which could be made in college services (e.g. need for day care, broader student activities); 13 percent concerned employee attitudes and staff development; 12 percent concerned information -- either the lack of or suggestions for improvement (manuals, tracking, research); another 12 percent concerned instructional issues; 11 percent concerned the facilities (need for a campus, lack of parking, and the need for a cafeteria); 8 percent concerned the need for an expanded curriculum and more courses; and the remaining 2 percent concerned financial matters.

3. What could we learn from the students at the college?

Finally we sought information from the students. A questionnaire with two questions was administered to students in 24 English course sections (including English as a Second Language, Basic Skills, and English composition) and second-year program courses. Students were asked first to list "things HCCC could change or improve to make sure" they remained at the college and to give reasons why any of their friends or acquaintances had dropped out. In all, 338 students, or 10% of the student body, responded.

Two-hundred ninety eight students offered suggestions for change or improvement at

the college. One third (33%) of the responses concerned facilities and parking, 17% curriculum and courses, 16% college services, 14% instruction, 13% academic support, and 7% finances.

Two-hundred fifty students responded to the second item. Fifty-four stated that they did not know anyone who had left the college before completing their program, but 196 (58% of the total 338 students) responded with reasons why someone they knew had left. Nearly one-fourth (23%) concerned curriculum and courses -- our curriculum is limited, 22% finances and/or time, 16% instruction, 12% personal reasons, 9% academic placement and/or grades, 9% college services, 6% facilities and parking, and 4% academic support.

Each of these surveys contributed to our understanding of what steps the college must take to make the college a more hospitable place for our students to meet their educational goals as we strove to become an urban comprehensive college

Conclusion

The task force struggled to establish its agenda. There were constraints which had to be faced; these included a lack of knowledge about retention issues in general and about reasons why our students left before completing their programs, and there was the inability of a group of 22 persons to find a common meeting time. We struggled with definitions; we were not satisfied to simply adopt canned definitions. But we shared in the struggles; our awareness of retention issues was heightened; we came to agreement on the main campus issues; and, we are now arriving at preliminary recommendations for encouraging student persistence.

We faltered at times, but there is consensus that even in our stumbling, we learned. We are sharing the process our retention task force went through and what we learned so that others can benefit from our experience.